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ABSTRACT

The ethical behavior of counselors is an issue of current importance to those in the profession. This paper briefly examines the literature in this area. While considerable descriptive research on ethical behavior exists, the conspicuous absence of any experimental methodologies and theoretically-based investigations were noted. The need for new research directions is emphasized together with a theoretical conceptualization from which to investigate ethical behavior. Research is presented to support the conceptualization. The results provide support for the formulations of counselor ethical behavior. Implications for new directions in theoretically-based research as well as counselor training in the ethical decision making process are discussed. (Author)

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THE ETHICAL BEHAVIOR OF COUNSELORS: NEW DIRECTIONS IN ETHICAL BEHAVIOR RESEARCH

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The Ethical Behavior of Counselors: New Directions in Ethical Behavior Research.

The area of counselor ethical behavior has recieved increased attention in recent years. While the literature on counseling and ethics appears to be quite extensive, experimental research in this area is conspicuously absent.

Ethical behavior is not a new concern, for the counseling profession. Over twenty years ago Schwebel (1955) commented on the dearth of research-based literature in this area and appealed to the profession to remedy the situation. Similarly, Hobbs (1959) stressed a need to critically examine the ethical behavior of the helping professions. While these initial attempts to focus research on ethical behavior are often cited, their efforts have generally gone unanswered.

Research on Ethics: First Approximations

Numerous individuals have provided much-needed comment on the ethical behavior of counselors (Beck, 1971; Daubner & Daubner, 1970; Goslin, 1971; Gutsch, 1968; Kelley, 1972; McGowan & Schmidt, 1962; Ware, 1971). Much of this work has involved providing additional guidelines, directions, interpretations, and suggestions on ethical conduct. These contributions have been useful in clarifying ethical behavior and providing a necessary examination of certain basic philosophical considerations.

Additionally, several research studies have provided a fairly strong, descriptive base from which to view counselors and their ethical behavior (Boyd, Tennyson, & Erickson, 1973, 1974; Cramer, Groff, & Zani, 1969; Noland, 1971; Nugent, 1969; Shertzer & Morris, 1972). Generally, these studies have been initial, descriptive efforts aimed at delineating the current state of ethical practice among counselors. Overall, the results of these studies have strongly suggested the existence of questionable ethical practices among counselors.

To date, the research has been exploratory with little generality or ability to explain ethical behavior. The profession finds itself in the paradoxical situation of having certain ethical theories that lack research support together with research that is without theoretical support. Thus, we are still no closer to understanding those factors which affect ethical behavior.

Methodologically, these initial attempts should serve as a precursor to the formulation of experimentally-testable research questions and hypotheses. It is felt that the descriptive foundations exist and it is not time to procede toward theoretically-based research.

New Research Directions

A significant step in the direction of investigating ethical behavior from a theoretically-based conceptualization was made by Van Hoose and Goldman (1971). They attempted to measure the ethical posture of school coun-

selors using an Ethical Judgment Scale (EJS, 1975) which conceptualized ethical behavior in terms of five stages of ethical orientation, somewhat analagous to Kohlberg's (1975) stages of moral development.

With further theoretical refinements (Paradise, 1976), the model can be briefly summerized as follows:

1) The ethical orientation of counselors, i.e., the underlying rationale for a judgment or course of action when faced with an ethical dilemma, can be characterized along a stage continum of five qualitatively discrete orientations:
   a) Punishment Orientation- strict adherence to prevailing rules and standards. One should be punished for bad behaviour.
   b) Institutional Orientation- strict adherence to institutional rules and policies.
   c) Societal Orientation- maintenance of standards, approval of others and societal welfare.
   d) Individual Orientation- primary concern for needs of individual while avoiding violation of laws and rights of others.
   e) Principle Orientation- concern for client is primary with little regard for legal, professional, or societal consequences.
2) Movement in ethical judgment, the reasoning process underlying ethical decision-making, is forward and irreversible, while ethical action, the overt be-

havior associated with an ethical dilemma, need not be forward and is irreversible. Thus, the quality of ethical reasoning is always at the same or higher level as the potential ethical action, but the action can reflect a lower level.

3) The underlying assumption is that while the stages reflect a qualitative aspect, there exists an underlying qualitative aspect to ethical orientation, that is, certain ethical judgments are better or more sophisticated than others.

4) Situational influences may produce discrepencies between levels of reasoning and action such that these discrepencies could generate ethical conflict. Where a person's action is at a lower level than his or her reasoning, conflict is likely to ensue.

Research on the validity of the above theoretical formulations as well as the Ethical Judgment Scale (Van Hoose and Paradise, 1977) has proved initial support for the theoretical model and the efficacy of assessing ethical orientation using the Ethical Judgment Scale (Paradise, 1976; Vafakas, 1974). The purpose of this paper is to present this empirical evidence together with theoretically-based research questions for future inquiry.

Toward a Theory of Ethical Behavior

To provide support for the stage conceptualization of ethical orientation, it was hypothesized that a counselor's secondary stage of ethical orientation, the second most

frequently selected stage, would be adjacent to the dominant or modal orientation.

To test this hypotheses, 85 Masters-level counseling students at the University of Virginia recieved the EJS. For each counselor, his or her dominant and secondary orientation was assessed. The normal approximation to the binomial test was used to analyze the data. The results supported the hypothesis ($p < .001$). It was concluded that if a counselor was moving into or leaving a given stage, it would be adjacent to the modal stage, thus supporting the stage conceptualization of ethical orientation.

It was also hypothesized that direct training in ethical decision-making influences the ethical orientation of counselors.

To test this hypothesis, a posttest only, control group design was used with 40 counseling students. The students were randomly divided into an experimental group, which recieved short-term group exposure to principle levels of reasoning in relation to general moral dilemmas, and a control group, which recieved normal classroom discussion of ethical codifications. Both groups were given the EJS to assess their ethical orientation. The data were analyzed with the χ^2 approximation to the two sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The results confirmed the hypothesis ($p < .05$), suggesting the utility of structured ethical training for counselors as a method to improve their ethical awareness.

Implications: New Training and Research Directions

The results of this research suggest the possibility of a redirection in ethical research from essentially descriptive ef-

forts to theoretically-based research. Also, the use of structured group exercises to facilitate the ethical development of counselors suggests wide-ranging implications for counselor training programs. Training in the ethical decision-making process can be viewed as a necessary adjunct to counselor training. With this conceptualization, the further development of program materials and techniques for ethical training is needed.

Additionally, new research questions, relevent to theoretically-based research, will need to be posed and solutions sought. Possible research questions to advance our understanding of cause and effect relationships in ethical behavior could ask:

a) Is there any difference between what counselors actually do and what they say they would do?

b) Why unethical behavior?

c) How does ethical behavior develop?

d) Are counselor's ethical behaviors different in different situations?

e) What factors in the field, if any, modify or affect ethical posture?

These questions are just a few of the many issues of needed inquiry. It is hoped that the theoretical formulations suggested in this paper can provide a foundation for future work in this area.

Writer's Note:

This paper is intended to be a brief, informal report on needed research on ethical behavior. I have attempted to stimulate thinking in a neglected research area rather than present a formal structured report on research which I have conducted. Formal reports on the research discussed in this paper together with the development of the EJS are available from the writer.

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